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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 QUEBEC 000169

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: QUEBEC BY-ELECTIONS : LIBERALS DEFEATED IN THREE OUT OF FOUR SEATS

REF: QUEBEC 0128

1. This cable was jointly prepared by the Quebec City and Montreal Consulates.

2. Summary: In the first test of its support among voters since its election victory in April 2003, the Quebec Liberal government held four provincial by-elections on September 20; three in the Montreal area and one in Quebec City. Premier Jean Charest lost three of the four ridings up for grabs. As predicted, the Liberals were re-elected in their stronghold of Nelligan, and the Parti Quebecois was re-elected in the Gouin riding. However, there were two surprising results. A Parti Quebecois candidate won narrowly in the riding of Laurier-Dorion, which had been a Liberal base since 1981, and in Quebec City's Vanier riding Mario Dumont's Action Democratique du Quebec (ADQ) seized a fifth seat in the National Assembly from the Liberals. End Summary.

VANIER CONTEST

3. Young ADQ contender Sylvain Legare won handily in the Quebec City riding of Vanier with well over 4,000 votes and a 46.8% majority. Liberal Michel Beaudoin came in second place at 27.9%, and the PQ's Sylvain Levesque at 21.9%. The ADQ lost badly in the three other ridings, coming in fourth place behind the new left-wing Union des Forces Progressistes (UFP). Vanier is usually a bellweather, regularly voting for the party that will form the next government. Leader Dumont's strategy to crusade in favor of local radio station CHOI-FM (see refel) and against juvenile prostitution proved successful. He will face his members at the ADQ party convention next weekend head high.

4. The PQ came in third in the Vanier contest, francophone and blue-collar, with only 20% of the vote, even though voter dissatisfaction traditionally leans toward the opposition. Opposition Leader Bernard Landry's leadership has been under close scrutiny and voters seem unconvinced that he is the right man to lead the PQ to a possible victory in 2007.

MONTREAL RACES

5. In Montreal, two of the three by-elections followed expectations: Liberal Yolande James and the PQ's Nicolas Girard each easily won their parties' respective strongholds of Nelligan and Gouin. The lone upset occurred in Laurier-Dorion, where the Liberal candidate and Greek community representative, Voula Neofotistos, lost to the PQ's Elsie Lefebvre. The multi-ethnic character of the Laurier-Dorion riding -- in which Greek-Canadians are the largest ethnic group -- would have suggested that a sovereigntist, pro-French language, PQ candidate could not win. However, Elsie Lefebvre campaigned very actively, and apparently was able to get enough of her supporters to the polls to win by the relatively small margin of 435 votes.

6. The ethnic community vote is closely watched in Quebec as a harbinger of whether the appeal of sovereignty can extend beyond the province's Francophone population, and attract growing numbers of non-Francophone voters from more recent immigration waves, who mostly live in and around Montreal. But most analysts are discounting the significance of this particular by-election result. Turnout was a very low 35 percent. (Voter participation rates in general provincial elections are usually between 70 and 80 percent.).

NEW BLOOD IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

7. The four new members of the National Assembly distinguish themselves by their young age. Yolande James, a 26-year-old lawyer, will become the first black woman to sit in Quebec's National Assembly. Elsie Lefebvre, also 26, is completing a master's degree in international studies. Nicolas Girard, 32, was the press attache and protege of former PQ Environment Minister Andre Boisclair (who has temporarily left politics to study at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government). The ADQ's Sylvain Legare is 35.

8. Comment: Premier Charest came back from Ottawa with a health care agreement in his back pocket that was advertised as a precedent for provincial-federal negotiations. The Premier's success at last week's health conference with PM Martin and the

other Premiers did not go totally unnoticed, but it failed to dispel general dissatisfaction among voters or to incite Liberal voters to go to the polls. There is tangible dissatisfaction with the government and now, after 16 months in power and a dismal showing in the polls, Charest and his party will have to regroup. However, by-elections are customarily fought on local issues and last night's results will likely have no long-term political impact. The current standings in the National Assembly are: Liberal 74, the Parti Quebecois 46, and ADQ 5, of a total 125 seats. End Comment.

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